

Challenging Aboriginal Caricatures

By John Hansen
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It is apparent to me as an Aboriginal person that negative views and stereotypes persist today and continue to denigrate Aboriginal people in various aspects of their daily lives. For example, the other day, I was watching a hockey game at the local R. Johnstone Arena when I had the unfortunate experience of being introduced to a middle-aged Caucasian female. This woman, who I have never spoken to or met before in my life, presumed to have me all figured out. After indicating that she works in the criminal justice system, she went on to comment about her so-called first hand knowledge of my personal preference to live in jail. In her words, “I know who you are. You’re the guy who wants to go back to jail.” According to her, I am the type of person who needs and requires to be incarcerated. Obviously, she has me confused with another brother, but her theorizing does contribute to the social humiliation, stereotypes and psychological inferiorization of the Aboriginal. But, maybe it is worth stating that not all Aboriginal guys have a criminal record nor do we all belong in jail. In fact, many of us are not “bad guys” and there are many among us who contribute positively to society.

However, according to *The Commission on First Nations and Métis People* (2004), “Aboriginal accused are more likely to be denied bail, more likely to be charged with multiple offences, more than twice as likely as non-Aboriginal people to be incarcerated.” These kinds of factors indicate racial discrimination against Aboriginals in the criminal justice system. However, in order to understand the social stereotypes and the ideology of racism one must examine history.

During the 19th century, Western academics promoted cultural racism by extending stereotypes into the literature of the humanities and social sciences. Thanks to their unethical applications and erroneous conclusions, Indigenous people throughout the world have been misrepresented and stereotyped as having superficial minds, being lazy, morally depraved, backwards and were thus treated accordingly. Today, stereotypical views persist and serve to perpetuate the caricatures of Aboriginality. I want to confront one of the gross distortions and stereotypes of Aboriginals in the social, judicial and political realms, and thus challenge the

processes and structures that promote racism. Aboriginal culture, for example, is much more than negative stereotypes, and furthermore, there are Aboriginal accounts of positive contributions to Canada’s development. Stereotyping is more than a denigration of Aboriginality. It is a process of dehumanization, a mechanism that suppresses the potential for harmony among all human populations. Racist views obstruct our minds from developing a positive consciousness of reality; it is the vicious destroyer of everything human; its weapons are stereotypes, ignorance and cultural insensitivity.

As an Aboriginal person, as a human being, I am very concerned about the incredible lack of respect and stereotypical assumptions demonstrated by some individuals in society. Our Aboriginal identities are denigrated while we struggle against racism, disproportionate rates of unemployment, incarceration, impoverishment and myths. Fortunately, I have met many non-Aboriginals here in The Pas who have favorable interpretations of Aboriginal people that are non-stereotypical or non-racist. The last word should come from Jerry Macleod, a Cree Elder from James Smith First Nation, whose son Neil Macleod, a Native studies scholar, documented this story:

“A long time ago, an old man and his grandson went to town. The boy was about 14. They had gone to town to buy groceries. They collected the items that they needed. After they had filled their cart, there was a man by the door. He said to his friend, “damn lazy Indians.” The man went up to the old man and said, “You are goddamned lazy. Why can’t you just stay on the reserve, where you belong?”

The taunts continued, but the old man kept calm. After they gathered their groceries, they stood outside. The grandson asked, “Nimosom (grandfather), why didn’t you say something to that man who was saying those things to us?”

The grandfather answered with another question: “How long were we in the store?”

“Well, we were there for five minutes.”

“Yes, my grandson. We were in that store for five minutes. We had to deal with that man for five minutes. But he has to deal with himself for the rest of his life.”

As I interpret this story, this teaching for living, I see that our continued existence depends on channeling our energy toward peaceful things, like sharing our stories, educating the public, and not by hating.

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